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First They Fought About Masks. Then Over the Soul of the City.

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ENID, Okla. — On a hot night in July, the first summer of the pandemic, Jonathan Waddell, a city commissioner in Enid, Okla., sat staring out at a rowdy audience dressed in red. They were in the third hour of public comments on a proposed mask mandate, and Mr. Waddell, a retired Air Force sergeant who supported it, was feeling increasingly uncomfortable.

He had noticed something was different when he drove up in his truck. The parking lot was full, and people wearing red were getting out of their cars greeting one another, looking a bit like players on a sports team. As the meeting began, he realized that they opposed the mandate. It was almost everybody in the room.

The meeting was unlike any he had ever attended. One woman cried and said wearing a mask made her feel like she did when she was raped at 17. Another read the Lord's Prayer and said the word "agenda" at the top of the meeting schedule seemed suspicious. A man quoted Patrick Henry and handed out copies of the Constitution.

"The line is being drawn, folks," said a man in jeans and a red T-shirt. He said the people in the audience "had been shouted down for the last 20 years, and they're finally here to draw a line, and I think they're saying, 'We've had enough.'"

At the end of the night, the mask mandate failed, and the audience erupted in cheers. But for Mr. Waddell, who had spent seven years making Enid his home, it was only the beginning. He remembers driving home and watching his mirrors to make sure no one was following him. He called his father, a former police officer, and told him what had happened. He said that people were talking about masks, but that it felt like something else. What, exactly, he did not know.

"I said, 'This is honestly just crazy, Dad, and I'm not sure where it goes from here.'"

In the year and a half that followed, fierce arguments like this have played out in towns and cities across the country.

From lockdowns to masks to vaccines to school curriculums, the conflicts in America keep growing and morphing, even without Donald Trump, the leader who thrived on encouraging them, in the White House. But the fights are not simply about masks or schools or vaccines. They are, in many ways, all connected as part of a deeper rupture — one that is now about the most fundamental questions a society can ask itself: What does it mean to be an American? Who is in charge? And whose version of the country will prevail?

Social scientists who study conflict say the only way to understand it — and to begin to get out of it — is to look at the powerful currents of human emotions that are the real drivers. They include the fear of not belonging, the sting of humiliation, a sense of threat — real or perceived — and the strong pull of group behavior.

Some of these feelings were already coursing through American society, triggered by rapid cultural, technological, demographic and economic change. Then came the pandemic, plunging Americans into uncertainty and loneliness, an emotion that scientists have found causes people to see danger where there is none.

Add to all of that leaders who stoke the conflict, and disagreements over the simplest things can become almost sectarian.

[Eran Halperin](#), a social psychologist at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Israel who studies [emotions in conflict](#), said that people in intractable fights often do not remember how they started but that they are perpetuated by a sense of group threat. One's group — for example, American or Christian — is an extension of oneself, and people can become very defensive when it — or its status in a hierarchy — changes.

“If my American identity is an important part of who I am, and suddenly there's a serious threat to that, in some ways that means I don't know who I am anymore,” he said. “It's an attack on the very core of how I see myself, of how I understand myself.”

Professor Halperin said he has been surprised to see that the emotions that have powered the conflict in America were just as intense as those he sees between Israelis and Palestinians. That is because in the United States, unlike in Israel, both sides had relatively high expectations of each other, he said, leading to a sharp shock when “those who were part of us, suddenly do something so counter to our values.”

In Enid, both sides in the mask debate believed they were standing up for what was right. Both cared deeply for their city — and their country — and believed that, in their own way, they were working to save it. And it all started as an argument over a simple piece of cloth.

Birth of the Freedom Fighters

One of the first to speak at the City Council meeting that night in July was Melissa Crabtree, a home-schooling mother who owns a business selling essential oils and cleaning products. Ms.

Crabtree was new to Enid — she had moved two years before from Texas — but also to politics, drawn in by the pandemic. When states enacted sweeping rules like lockdowns, mask mandates and school closures to combat the spread of illness, she was skeptical.

The more she researched online, the more it seemed that there was something bigger going on. She said she came to the conclusion that the government was misleading Americans. For whose benefit she could not tell. Maybe drug companies. Maybe politicians. Whatever the case, it made her feel like the people in charge saw her — and the whole country of people like her — as easy to take advantage of.

“I don’t like to be played the fool,” said Ms. Crabtree, who also works as an assistant to a Christian author and speaker. “And I felt like they were counting on us — us being the general population — on being the fool.”

She felt contempt radiating from the other side, a sense that those who disagreed with her felt superior and wanted to humiliate her. She said she was taken aback at how people were ridiculing her on a pro-mask group on Facebook. She said she remembers one person writing that he hoped she would get Covid and die.

“I had to stop going into that group,” she said. “Why people are choosing to shame others, I don’t know.” But she said she thought that fear must be at the root of it.

Ms. Crabtree grew up in a highly devout family, with parents who met at a Campus Crusade for Christ conference. The whole family was active in their faith, volunteering at their churches, going on mission trips, holding Bible studies in their home. Her father served in the Air Force, and they moved around a lot. As a child, she lived in Germany, Colorado, South Dakota, Ohio, Alaska and Maryland.

She accepted Jesus at a backyard Bible club when she was 4 and has never questioned her faith, despite life’s hardships, including the mental health struggles of a close family member and years of infertility. Her most traumatic experience — being run over by a car in her driveway as a young child — reinforced her faith. The only remaining trace — her left eye does not tear when she cries — is a reminder, she said, of how God spared her on that winter day.

“I knew that the Lord had a purpose for us and that it was to follow him and glorify him and obey him,” she said. “I really didn’t question that. I didn’t feel the need to explore this whole world around me.”

But now, at 45, she said she believes that Americans broadly, and Christians in particular, have left too much of the running of the country to a governing class that has taken advantage of power. She blames her parents’ generation for “not talking about religion or politics,” a position that she said has led to a loss of influence.

This makes her feel unsettled, because America is changing. Gender is blurred in ways that she said she believes God did not intend. She said a man in her church comes to Sunday services

dressed in women's clothing. When she was shopping this fall, a cashier at T.J. Maxx who checked her out looked like a man but, as she saw it, had feminine mannerisms.

"I wanted to shake him and say, 'You can be the man you are!'" she said. "'It's OK to use your strong voice.'"

She home schools her children, in part to steer clear of these shifts. But the bigger problem, as she sees it, is that the broader culture seems to applaud them. It is not just sexuality. There are other issues too. For example, what she sees as the left's preoccupation with race and its telling of history.

"Why all of a sudden are we teaching our 5-year-olds to be divided by color?" she said. "They don't care what color your skin is until you tell them that that 5-year-old's grandpa was mean 200 years ago."

Demographics are changing too. Growing numbers of Hispanic people and Asian people from the Marshall Islands call Enid home. The county of Garfield, in which Enid is the seat, was 94 percent white in 1980. Last year, that figure was about 68 percent. The county experienced one of the largest increases in racial diversity in the country over the past decade, 2020 census data show.

Teachers and administrators in Enid's school system have worked hard to integrate growing numbers of immigrant children. But everyone else interviewed in Enid, including Ms. Crabtree, who is white, expressed surprise when told of the scale of this change. Immigrants tend to live in certain parts of town and work in certain jobs, like at the meat plant, and do not yet have high-profile positions of power.

Still, she could feel that change overall was accelerating, and that was making her feel like she was losing her country, like it was becoming something she did not recognize.

"I truly think that what we are doing is pulling our republic apart at the seams," she said.

So when she heard about the indoor mask mandate proposal last year in her city, she jumped to get involved. She discovered that she liked bringing people together, people whose thinking she shared. It felt good to learn together, and to belong to this group she was building with urgent purpose. Eventually she made a Facebook page called Enid Freedom Fighters.

"How do I sign up to talk?" she said, giving an example of the questions people were asking. "I don't know. I'll have to find out and get back to you.' 'How long can we talk?' 'I don't know. I'll find out.' I didn't know any of it. But I'm willing to learn."

She told people to come to the meeting and to wear red shirts so they could spot one another.

And in July 2020, when she walked into the City Council meeting, wearing a red dress and a red cardigan sweater, and saw the others, she felt nervous, but also excited.

“I just thought, OK, we’re not alone,” she said. “This is worth doing. There are more people like me who care this much.”

The mandate failed. They could tell their voices mattered.

‘Ostracized From the Community’

Mr. Waddell voted for the mask mandate, and the reaction was immediate. The following Sunday, people he had prayed with for years avoided him at church. The greeters, an older couple he knew well, looked the other way when he walked by. Several people left the church altogether because of his association with it, he said.

Mr. Waddell listened to critics of the mandate, but their position baffled him. The idea of individual sacrifice for a greater good was ingrained from years in the military. He grew up in Washington State, the youngest child of Black civil servants who left the Deep South in the 1970s. He went into public service, too, joining the Air Force after a year of college. When he retired seven years ago, he was at a base near Enid, and he and his wife decided to settle in town with their four children.

He knew Enid was conservative. Garfield County has voted for the Republican candidate in every presidential election since 1940. But he considered himself conservative too. He is a registered independent who believes in the right to bear arms and fiscal responsibility. And anyway, national politics were not important to him. Good schools and low housing prices were what he cared about.

So Mr. Waddell and his family threw themselves into making Enid home. Mr. Waddell volunteered as an associate pastor at his church. He won a seat on the City Council and began looking for funding for youth programs. As a new member, he took constituents out to lunch and listened to their problems. If this was going to be his home, he wanted to belong and to be helpful to people who lived there.

But as the months went by, none of the people he had bought lunch for, or helped get funding for their organizations, stood up for him. A former military member whom he counted as a friend even joined the Enid Freedom Fighters. He felt as if he were living in a town that no longer recognized him.

The attention he did get was sometimes menacing. His daughter, 7 at the time, was picked on at school because of his stance. Military security on the base where Mr. Waddell now works as a civilian handling IT operations took him aside to tell him about threats against him, though noted it did not think they would be acted on. He began checking a security camera at his house through an app on his phone.

“There’s just this vitriol in this place that we chose,” said Mr. Waddell, who is 41. “We’re ostracized from the community that we chose. It’s kind of a surreal feeling.”

The city commissioner who introduced the mask mandate, Ben Ezzell, a lawyer and artist, got veiled warnings too — mostly via email and Facebook. Someone dumped trash on his lawn. At one City Council meeting, a man shouted that he knew where Mr. Ezzell lived. Another meeting got so tense that police officers insisted on escorting him to his car.

But Mr. Ezzell, who is 35, was not done arguing for the mandate. As summer turned to fall, and Covid cases began to spike, it seemed like the logical thing to do. So he kept bringing it up in meetings, prompting Ms. Crabtree and the Freedom Fighters to begin the process of trying to recall him to stop it. She also accused him of acting disrespectfully, for example, using profanity and doodling during people’s speeches. (He said he drew lemmings walking off cliffs to stay calm, particularly when comment sessions from emotional residents went on for hours.)

A prominent supporter of the recall effort was Ms. Crabtree’s pastor, Wade Burleson, whose church, Emmanuel Enid, is the largest in town. Enid has a substantial upper middle class, with large homes and a gated community near a country club and a golf course, and many of those families are part of the church’s 3,000-strong congregation.

But in the early months of the pandemic, he started speaking against mask mandates. He [promoted the work of Dr. Vladimir Zelenko](#), a Ukrainian-born doctor turned [right-wing media star](#), who claimed to have a novel treatment for the coronavirus. Mr. Burleson used apocalyptic language, invoking Nazi doctors as a specter of where mask and vaccine mandates could end up. Mandates, he argues, are the first steps toward complete government control, and he feels called to warn people.

Winning Felt Good

The City Council finally passed a mask rule in December 2020. Mr. Ezzell said it was toothless but better than nothing, so he voted for it. And while the recall effort against him ultimately failed, the Freedom Fighters, now energized, had bigger plans.

In February, they swept the local elections, winning three seats on the City Council — including Mr. Waddell’s and Mr. Ezzell’s. Winning felt good and they kept going. Over the course of this year, through a series of elections, appointments and City Council votes, they have helped get four candidates onto the school board and another four onto the library board, Ms. Crabtree said, the latter after a disagreement over a display of L.G.B.T.Q. books for Pride Month.

“The red shirts have assumed effective control of most of the public bodies in Enid,” Mr. Ezzell said this month. He estimated that those who cared enough about the mask mandate to show up at a public meeting to speak against it were a small minority of the city’s 50,000 population. But they had an outsize effect on the Council’s moderate members, because in this moment of defensiveness and threat, going against members of your own tribe is extremely difficult.

The new city commissioners include Keith Siragusa, 53, a former police officer from New York City, who worked on Enid's police force for years and now works as a therapeutic horse riding instructor for disabled and troubled children, and Whitney Roberts, a photographer originally from California who owns a shop in Enid.

Ms. Roberts, who is 34, said that when she came out as a Trump supporter on Facebook in 2016, "I had a lot of friends delete me, without saying anything," behavior that she said told her that they thought they were better than her, that she was not worth bothering with. Mr. Ezzell reminded her of that, she said, doodling instead of listening to people, "not even acknowledging that they're there."

Mr. Ezzell, for his part, said that after hours of heated speeches — many of them aimed at him and trumpeting things that were not true — he did not think that "the duty to bend over backward for that kind of vitriol is indefinite."

Ms. Roberts said that the new city commissioners mostly agree on things, and that the focus has gone back to the business of local government — fixing potholes and continuing work on a large water pipeline.

She said the Council has not spent much time on Covid, but with rates of new cases and of hospitalizations less than half of what they were at the end of 2020, it has not been a burning issue. She said she had not gotten a single email about Covid from a constituent since she started.

Enid's City Council may no longer be a stage for national politics, but Mr. Burleson has continued to bring national politics to Enid. One Sunday this past August, he sat down in his church with Charlie Kirk, the right-wing speaker, who during the pandemic has been visiting churches across the country calling on people to get involved in politics.

"They want to crush you," Mr. Kirk said at an evening talk at Emmanuel Enid, referring to an unspecified "metropolitan elite," and to government leaders, including Republicans. "They call you the smelly Walmart people. They do. You should hear the way your leaders talk about you. They have contempt for you. They want to try to turn Oklahoma into nothing more than a producing colony for the rest of the country."

'People Are Waking Up'

In the end, both sides could agree on one thing: The fight was not really over masks.

Mr. Waddell thought it had to do with fear. He said America is in a moment when the people who ran things from the beginning — mostly white, mostly Christian, mostly male — are now having to share control. Their story about America is being challenged. New versions are becoming mainstream, and that, he believes, is threatening.

“You don’t just get to be the sole solitary voice in terms of what we do here, what we teach here, what we show on television here,” he said. “You don’t get to do it anymore. That’s where the fight is.”

He sees it as the next chapter in the story of what it means to be an American, of who gets to write this country’s story. But he does not see the country getting through it without a fight.

“We’re going to have an explosion,” he said. “Whether it’s literal or figurative. It’s going to be bad.”

For Mr. Waddell, the past 18 months have been the most painful of his life. He said the experience changed him, and left him feeling that Enid, as much as he tried to build a life there, no longer feels like home.

He said he is working on forgiveness. But he is also applying for jobs outside Oklahoma: Several applications in Arizona look promising.

Of the City Council election, he said: “I think the process worked. You elect representatives that reflect your ideals. And these folks do. They reflect the ideals of Enid. And I’m OK with that.”

Carol Lahman, the city attorney in Enid, said that the mandate fight was “temporarily divisive” but that it also had a positive effect: drawing more people into the decision-making process. She said she loves Enid because its people believe that government is accessible and that showing up and voicing concern will make a difference. “Yes, people differ in what the right direction is from time to time,” she said. “It is a work in progress.”

Ms. Crabtree now attends most every City Council meeting. The Christian author she works for is now running for Congress. She herself was tapped for a seat on the state board of education, but after an outcry that she was against mask and vaccine mandates and that she home schools instead of participating in public schools, and some threatening messages online, [she withdrew](#).

Still, she is hopeful for the future.

She is proud of her son, who she said cares deeply about the country. He flew to Washington, D.C., on Jan. 6 to go to Mr. Trump’s speech with her father. She said they did not participate in what came after. He graduated from high school last year but did not want to go to college and “pay \$100,000 to fight indoctrination.” She said he now works at Chick-fil-A and wants to teach his peers about patriotism.

“He wants to right all the wrongs in the world,” she said. “He said, ‘Mom, I don’t have time to go to college. We have a country to save.’”

In July, the Enid Freedom Fighters had a [one-year anniversary party](#). They rented a bouncy house and ate hot dogs and tacos in a local park. A snow cone food truck came with a red, white and blue Enid Freedom Fighter flavor.

“Were we successful?” Ms. Crabtree said. “Absolutely. Because we learned a lot. We’ve educated a whole lot of people.”

She added: “There are a whole bunch of people who are realizing, oh, apathy didn’t serve us well. Look at where we are. I think we better wake up and get involved. I think people are waking up.”

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